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SUBJECT: ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER SPEAKS WITH BASIL RAJAPAKSA

Classified By: Richard Boucher for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: On March 18, Assistant Secretary for South and Central Asian Affairs Boucher met with Sri Lankan Presidential Advisor Basil Rajapaksa regarding the humanitarian situation in Sri Lanka. He pressed Rajapaksa to halt the continuing Sri Lankan Army shelling of the safe zone and emphasized the need to allow medical supplies to reach the wounded. A/S Boucher asked Rajapaksa to inquire into Sri Lankan visas which have been denied to workers from the International Committee for the Red Cross and urged him to permit a UN High Commission for Human Rights fact-finding mission to visit Sri Lanka. Boucher emphasized that the US government has continued to work quietly with the Sri Lankan government, but our concerns are rising and we may need to make them more public. End Summary.

Economy

¶2. C) Boucher and Basil Rajapaksa began their meeting by discussing the state of the Sri Lankan economy. (Note: Rajapaksa has come to Washington for talks with the International Monetary Fund.) Rajapaksa noted that part of Sri Lanka's economic problems were caused by global financial turmoil and the high price of oil imports, and that the IMF program would help address Sri Lanka's dwindling foreign exchange reserves. He indicated that there was a 12 percent growth in agriculture and a 28 percent growth in fisheries exports in the previous year. Boucher indicated that standard terms and conditions would apply to any assistance.

The End of the Conflict

¶3. (C) Turning to the ongoing civil war, Boucher thanked Rajapaksa for working closely with US Ambassador Blake in Colombo and asked Rajapaksa about the Sri Lankan government's plans for the last days of the war, indicating that any kind of major military sweep through remaining Tamil Tiger territory would be a major international problem.⁸ Rajapaksa indicated that the government is not planning for this kind of intervention, but has been working with Catholic bishops in the conflict area to find a land route by which civilians can leave. He suggested that there might be a possibility for civilians to leave to the north of the safe zone from the Chalai side.

¶4. (C) Rajapaksa indicated that the government was doing its best to persuade the Tigers lay down arms and that they have told the Tigers the government will give them amnesty and allow them to surrender to the International Committee of the Red Cross. He said the Sri Lankan government is open to other suggestions on how to address the situation, and that the government is talking with a Tamil National Alliance parliamentarian from the Mullaitivu region to find ways to persuade the Tigers. Boucher noted that Tamil political inclusion is important and will become more important as the war finishes.

Sri Lankan Army Shelling

15. (C) Boucher inquired about Sri Lankan Army shelling into the safe zone. Rajapaksa admitted that there may be some shelling of the safe zone, but that top military leadership had instructed field commanders not to target the safe zone or respond to fire from the safe zone. He noted that the Sri Lankan Army has taken many casualties, including 200 injured and 70 killed on March 17. Boucher emphasized that the Sri Lankan President had told Secretary Clinton that there was no shelling in the safe zone and there should be no shelling. He requested that Rajapaksa ensure that the Army Commanders orders are respected by the field officers.

Medical Shipments

16. (C) Rajapaksa denied that medicine has not reached the safe zone several weeks. He told Boucher that the required medicines (including anesthetics) were reaching the conflict area regularly, but that the government was only sending a few days worth at a time so that the medicine did not go to waste or spoil. Boucher noted that we have reports to the contrary and requested that Rajapaksa check again on medical shipments. (Note: Embassy Colombo's e-mail regarding no medicine shipments on the March 18 ICRC ship was not received until after the meeting with Rajapaksa.)

Visas for ICRC Staff

17. (C) Rajapaksa told Boucher that visas for Red Cross staff had been refused because they were not justified. He said that the burden is on the Red Cross to prove the need for those visas and to prove that local staff cannot be recruited for the same purposes. He indicated that their presence was no longer needed in the Eastern Province, Jaffna, or Omanthai because there are no longer any security checkpoints between Government and Tamil Tiger-controlled areas. When Boucher pushed Rajapaksa, offering that some of the staff were replacements for those in the conflict zone, Rajapaksa replied that the decision rests with the line ministry responsible for activities.

UNHCHR Fact Finding Mission

18. (C) Finally, Boucher requested that Rajapaksa accept the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights request for a fact finding mission to Sri Lanka. He said that the Sri Lankan government should facilitate the visit and that it would be an important signal to the international community. Boucher pointed out that the Sri Lankan government was democratically elected and will be measured by those standards. He noted that the US government first raises issues of concern with the Sri Lankan government bilaterally, but that as concerns rise and the American public (including the US Congress) become more and more interested, it may be difficult for us to remain publicly silent. He indicated that there would probably be another UN Security Council discussion on the issue.

Comment

19. (C) Rajapaksa is the first Sri Lankan official who has been forthcoming when discussing Sri Lankan Army shelling of the safe zone. However, we were disappointed to hear him claim that medical supplies were reaching the wounded in the safe zone when it is clear from Embassy Colombo reporting that there have not been shipments since February 20. His comments on visas for ICRC staff were unhelpful, but unsurprising given the Sri Lankan government's attitude towards international aid workers. End Comment.